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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE; NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WATERS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [KDEM](#)
SUBJECT: FATAH REFORM: WIDESPREAD EMPHASIS ON LEADERSHIP
CHANGES, INCREASING DEMOCRACY

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a series of meetings with NEA DAS Scott Carpenter March 6-8, Palestinian political and civil society leaders shared views on Fatah's current state and recommended steps to improve its performance in future elections. Contacts often differed on tactics, but agreed that severe leadership problems largely prompted Fatah's electoral defeat in January 2006 and that Fatah's weaknesses can only be remedied by democratizing the movement from the grassroots to its highest levels. Democratization poses difficulties ranging from control of internal elections and platform development to the basic challenge of defining Fatah membership. Most Fatah interlocutors said holding a sixth Fatah General Congress (FGC) is important, but views diverge as to whether that is imperative for Fatah reform, and how an FGC can be held given political, geographic, and logistical problems. Many contacts cautioned that if Fatah's leadership attempts to co-opt reformers or stop internal democratization, there will be a backlash that could split the movement. Despite discussing the need for new leadership, all agreed that PA President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is the glue holding Fatah together, and that Fatah reform is the best (and perhaps only) way to secure Abbas' position and ability to fight Hamas politically. All agreed that once Fatah reforms its leadership structures, it will also need to articulate a message and improve public outreach. END SUMMARY.

Leadership Reform Essential

¶2. (C) In March 6-8 meetings, DAS Carpenter met Fatah, independent, and minor party leaders who all stressed that Fatah's key problem, both before the 2006 elections and today, remains the urgent need for new leadership. Gaza Committee Chair Majid Abu Shammali said absence of new, democratic leadership in the movement since 1989 (when Fatah held its last FGC) was a key reason for the electoral "catastrophe." West Bank grassroots Fatah leaders (Assam Abu Bakr, Nablus Secretary General; Odeh Rajibi, Central Hebron Secretary General; and Awani Mashni, head of the Bethlehem

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Office of Mobilization and Organization) said Fatah has a "problem of leadership" and the solution is internal elections. Hussayn al-Shaykh and Hatim Abd al-Qadr (respectively chairman and a member of the newly-created West Bank field committee, reported septel), agreed that elections for a "clean and credible leadership" are critical to strengthen the party and, by extension, Abu Mazen. "If Fatah is strengthened through this process," al-Shaykh said, "this will assure the president reliable political support and have a positive security impact."

13. (C) Former PLC members Qadura Faris (Fatah--Ramallah) and Ziad Abu Zayyad (Independent--Jerusalem) also stressed the importance of internal elections, asserting that if leaders are not chosen democratically, they have no legitimacy. They said Fatah reform must be implemented vertically from local grassroots committees to the Fatah Central Committee (FCC). Separately, IRI presented the results of 16 focus group meetings with 180 Fatah members in 16 districts and interviews with 12 high-ranking West Bank and Gaza Fatah leaders in January and February 2007. The consistent message in these meetings was "Fatah need real leadership."

Field Committee Controversy

14. (C) While stressing the need for leadership reform through elections, many Palestinian interlocutors noted problems in deciding who controls these elections. Many perceive inconsistency between a commitment to elections and recent presidential appointment of West Bank and Gaza field committees. Faris said appointing the committees indicates that Fatah leaders are not serious about reform and they will use the committees to delay elections. Fatah PLC member Rabiha Diab complained that she was not consulted about the West Bank committee's membership and that the committee does not represent the most active party members. Hatim Abd al-Qadr acknowledged these concerns and admitted to wrestling with his own participation in the committee. He said he believes Abu Mazen made a bold decision and described the field committees as transitional structures independent from Fatah's traditional power centers pending internal elections. He said he felt compelled to serve on the committee, but will resign if the committee is not serious about elections.

15. (C) Most Fatah leaders also noted to DAS Carpenter problems with defining Fatah membership. The head of Fatah's

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PLC Bloc, Azam al-Ahmad, and former Minister of Women's Affairs, Zahira Kamal, said "Fatah is not a party; it's a national movement," and defining Fatah membership is critical if Fatah is to evolve into a political party. Al-Shaykh agreed, noting that the first task for the West Bank field committee is to define who is a party member. He added that Abu Mazen asked the committee to complete this task within three months, but it may take longer. Al-Shaykh, Mashni, and al-Ahmad all noted that membership identification is necessary for elections. Faris was the only dissenter on this point, describing member registration as "a joke." He said no Palestinian party is currently capable of identifying and registering all its members and Fatah should not begin that process until it accomplishes its priority of a new, democratic leadership. He said there is currently no oversight of member registration and the process is open to corruption. After leadership and structural changes, however, Faris said Fatah should accept a more open definition of membership given Fatah's multitude of constituencies.

Holding a Fatah General Conference (FGC)

16. (C) Most of DAS Carpenter's interlocutors agreed that Fatah reform requires a 6th FGC. Abu Zayyad said leadership renewal is impossible without it and "if Fatah wants to survive it must have a new Congress." Abd al-Qadr agreed that the FGC is "a magical solution" to Fatah's problems. Faris said he had met with Marwan Barghuthi on March 7, and that both he and Barghuthi believe Fatah should hold the FGC within a few months. He said Abu Mazen should decide he wants the FGC and set a date for it to prompt the Fatah committees to expedite necessary regional and district elections. Al-Ahmad disagreed, saying the focus should be on completing elections, not on a specific FGC date.

17. (C) Al-Ahmad said Fatah leadership does not favor

elections in the West Bank and Gaza in lieu of an FCC. In an effort to draw al-Ahmad out on his true commitment to a bottom-up effort, DAS Carpenter asked him if Fatah had considered avoiding the messiness of elections and instead simply expanding the existing FCC and Fatah Revolutionary Council (FRC). Al-Ahmad said a committee would look into the idea and submit recommendations to the Fatah leadership. He noted that two months ago this idea was totally rejected, but there is now "some acceptance" of it. (Comment: The FCC may see the writing on the wall and be more amenable to adding new FCC/FRC members to retain their own seats. End comment).

"Fatah Needs a Clear Vision and
the Means to Communicate It"

¶8. (C) All DAS Carpenter's contacts agreed that Fatah needs a new platform and the means to effectively communicate it. Abd al-Qadr joked that " Hamas is a party with a single vision and many mechanisms but Fatah is a party with many visions and no mechanism." Al-Shaykh said Fatah needs a new party platform to muster public support, a view echoed by Mashni, Abu Bakr, Rajibi, and PLC member Bernard Sabella. Sabella said once Fatah develops a message, the faction also needs to teach its membership how to communicate it, as Fatah desperately needs effective spokespersons. Mashni, Abu Bakr, and Rajibi asked for technical assistance in this field. The head of the Gaza field committee, Majid Abu Shammali, said his committee needs help with media and public outreach.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Hamas' electoral success seems to be stimulating late but significant Fatah reform efforts. Success is far from guaranteed, as internal opposition from the "old guard," grassroots skepticism and continued public image problems plague Fatah. We should support Fatah efforts to democratize its structures and help with outreach efforts to improve their competitiveness in future elections. We are currently supporting local Fatah leaders in preparing for internal elections through MEPI, and will examine ways to assist the new field committees--beginning with the Gaza committee--as Fatah develops a new platform and communication strategy. It is essential that Abu Mazen maintain momentum on creating a more dynamic and democratic image for Fatah. To do this, he will need to empower local, grassroots leaders, as polls demonstrate that voters found Fatah's most recent, "old guard"-led campaign to be manipulative with half-baked

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proposals and weak credibility. The impact of the NUG on Fatah reform is unclear. Abu Mazen and party leaders will need to generate reform momentum to prepare for new elections that many Fatah contacts say could arrive within a year.

¶10. (U) DAS Carpenter cleared this message.
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